A Comparison of the Voices of the Spanish Bartolomé de Las Casas and the Portuguese Fernando Oliveira on Just War and Slavery

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Abstract

This investigation compares the Spanish cleric, Bartolomé de Las Casas, with the Portuguese cleric, Fernando Oliveira, both of whom raised their voices in protest during the sixteenth century as Portugal and Spain politically extended, economically exploited, and religiously expanded into the Atlantic World. Las Casas condemned the wars of conquest and the consequent unjust enslavement of New World indigenous peoples; Oliveira condemned unjust warfare waged to promote and sustain the slave trade along the West African coast. This analysis demonstrates that both priests denounced warfare that violated the principles of just war and therefore resulted in enslavements without just cause.

Keywords

Just War, slavery, Bartolomé de Las Casas, Fernando Oliveira, sixteenth-century

Resumo

Esta investigação compara o clérigo espanhol, Bartolomé de Las Casas, com o clérigo Português, Fernando Oliveira. Ambos levantaram as suas vozes em protesto durante o século XVI, à medida que tanto Portugal como Espanha se fixavam no Novo Mundo com visibilidade ao nível político, económico e religioso. Las Casas condenou as guerras de conquista e a consequente escravização injusta dos povos indígenas do Novo Mundo; Oliveira condenou a guerra injusta travada para promover e apoiar o comércio de escravos ao longo da Costa Ocidental Africana. Esta análise demonstra que os dois sacerdotes denunciaram a guerra que violava os princípios da guerra justa e, portanto, favoreceu a escravatura sem justa causa.

Palavras-chave

Guerra Justa, escravatura, Bartolomé de Las Casas, Fernando Oliveira, século XVI

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When considering the opening of the Atlantic World to European exploration in the fifteenth century, as well as its subsequent contact, conquest, and colonization, few names receive as much scholarly attention as Bartolomé de Las Casas (b. Seville, 1484 – d. Madrid, 1566). With the waning sunset of the medieval era, the dawning sunrise of the Renaissance world, and the approaching midday sun of the early modern era, among those especially associated with counter-narratives of this transitional process in America and Iberia, Las Casas has maintained prominence in the critique of the abrupt arrival and disruptive entrance of Columbus and other Europeans into the Atlantic World and especially into the so-called New World. Yet, does Las Casas, the Spanish Dominican, deserve this prominent encomium, or were there Portuguese Iberians – including Lusitanian Dominicans – who also raised voices of protest during the era denominated as the Age of Exploration? This study seeks to generate scholarship related to this query and proposes an initial response. To do so, the period in which Las Casas and his Lusitanian contemporaries lived will be contextualized first by a brief description of the Age of Exploration in the Atlantic world. A brief history will then be presented of the Dominican Order and its reforms in Portugal and Spain, which also shaped Las Casas, as well as his Portuguese Dominican contemporaries. Subsequently, several Portuguese Dominicans will be suggested as possible candidates for study, followed by a focused comparison of the voices of protest of Las Casas and of a former Lusitanian Dominican, Fernando Oliveira; both addressed just war and issues of slavery.

There were earlier European explorations of the Atlantic World such as the voyages of the Vikings in the North Atlantic. See, Voyage and Exploration in the North Atlantic from the Middle Ages to the 17th Century Papers Presented at the 19th International Congress of Historical Sciences, Oslo, 2000, Anna Aagnarssóttir, ed. Reykjavik, University of Iceland, 2001; Lincoln P. Paine, Ships of Discovery and Exploration (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2000), xiii, xiv; Donald S. Johnson and Juha Nurminen, The History of Seafaring: Navigating the World's Oceans (London: Conway, 2007), 122-27. Although noteworthy and interesting, these accounts are beyond the scope and focus of this particular project.

The Age of Extension, Exploitation, and Expansion

In the initiation of the process of opening the Atlantic World to European extension and exploitation, Portugal occupies first place. Although, in the early fourteenth century, Portugal initiated medieval maritime contact with England and other parts of Europe for cabotage and diplomacy, beginning in the early fifteenth century, Lusitanian vessels pushed further into the mysterious and mythologized Atlantic, where they initially encountered the uninhabited islands of Madeira and then those of the Azores. After these initial insular encounters and early colonial establishments, Portuguese mariners made progressive efforts toward and cumulative advances down the western coast of Africa, including contact along the way with various state-level societies, some highly sophisticated. Eventually, this ocean-plying enterprise culminated in Portuguese ships reaching beyond the Atlantic coast of Africa, rounding the Cape of Good Hope in 1488, arriving in the East – initially on the eastern coast of Africa, then in India and, in time, in the East Indies, Vietnam, Japan, and China, as well as making one subsequent east-bound voyage to Brazil in 1500.

Portugal’s political and geographic union solidified earlier than Spain’s. The initiation of this union began following the 1139 Battle of Ourique – a conflict with national foundational mythical overtones. In time, this small Iberian kingdom, with equally complex yet profoundly differing cultural-historical sensibilities from those of Spain, gradually became a large contender in the European push into the Atlantic World. As a

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8 The heady time of the early Portuguese maritime exploration is captured in Luís de Camões’ epic poem Os Lusíadas, which among other versical exultations extols Portuguese exceptionalism. See Luís de Camões, Os Lusíadas, edição Emanuel Paulo Ramos (Porto: Editora, 2011), 71-72; passim.